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ABSTRACT

As part of a series of booklets designed to support parents and carers of young children in the home, this issue focuses on how to teach children to read books as well as to help children from birth become familiar with language and texts in many different forms. Following an introductory section emphasizing the early years as the foundation for all later growth, development, and learning and identifying important characteristics of infants' and young children's parents and carers, the booklet is organized in five sections. Section 1 comments on young children's interest in print materials and the range of texts available in children's everyday lives; this section also defines reading, literacy, and critical literacy. Sections 2 and 3 provide the following types of information about infants and toddlers, respectively: (1) what is being learned about reading at each stage of development; (2) ways to support reading; (3) suggested activities for at home; and (4) suggested activities for when parents and children are out and about. Section 4 focuses on what preschool children are learning about reading, as well as how parents and carers can encourage a positive attitude toward reading, help their child to understand the processes of reading, and support critical literacy. Section 5 suggests titles for further reading and lists books to read with children. (KB)

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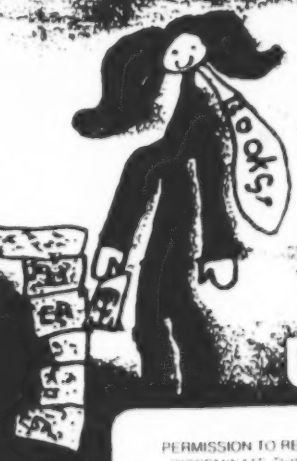
ECA Learning at home series

Number 2 2003

Learning to read

By Leonie Arthur



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About the Learning at Home Series

The ***Learning at Home Series*** has been developed to support parents and carers of young children in their most important task—starting young children on the pathway of a lifetime of living and learning.

The first years of life are the foundation for all later growth, development and learning.

- Early experiences set the pattern for all later learning.
- Early experiences and relationships affect how children feel about themselves, how they get on with other people and how they join in and enjoy life.
- Every experience has an impact. Babies and young children are learning all the time, regardless of whether we think we are 'teaching' them.

Research has shown that a strong foundation in these years starts children on the pathway to:

- being able to relate confidently and effectively with others;
- mental and emotional health; and
- making the most of each child's abilities in education.

Babies and young children are learning all the time.

This research also shows us what kinds of experiences and relationships babies and young children need, to get the best start for living and learning.

Learning at home series

What matters is how they are learning and what they are learning. Learning takes place in relationships. If the earliest relationships are warm and loving, babies and young children have the best chance to make the most of the opportunities in their worlds.

To learn best they need parents and carers (their first teachers) who:

- are warm and caring;
- know each baby or child very well and appreciate what is special about them;
- take time to understand the child's messages (cues) and to respond to them with encouragement, praise, comfort, independence and rest as needed; and
- are able to see, share and celebrate the big and small joys and achievements of the children in their care.

There is no set list of things to teach babies and young children.

Living is learning and children learn through living. These books are a guide to how young children learn and how best to help them at the different stages of early childhood. All children and babies have their own abilities and interests.

Adults watch and listen and provide opportunities and support to build on each child's strengths. Babies and children also come from family and cultural backgrounds that are part of the way they are and need to be included in their experiences.

Adults provide responsive and sensitive care, a safe and interesting place to be and follow children's lead in providing things they like to do ... children do the learning.

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About ECA

Early Childhood Australia Inc. (ECA) actively promotes the provision of high quality services for all young children from birth to eight years and their families, and supports the important role of parents. ECA is also the national umbrella organisation for children's services. ECA is a leading specialist early childhood publisher.

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Learning to read

Comments from parents about their children's reading:

'Meneka and Rajal (one-year-old twins) are interested in books, magazines and children's television programs. They often pick up weekend papers and magazines and point to pictures and diagrams.'

'Steven (age 3) plays out the videos. He role-plays Lion King with dinosaurs using lines from the video. He knows it off by heart. He memorises the lines and joins in the video. And he can sing the songs.'

'Tahlia (age 4) likes to read the ABC children's magazine. She 'reads' this to herself every night and we usually read her a book as well. She also likes to 'read' newspapers and magazines that are lying around the house and things like catalogues, bus tickets, and ads on bus shelters. She sometimes plays on the computer or looks at the Internet with us. She uses the pictures and sound to get to where she wants to go.'

These children are all showing interest in print, pictures and stories, and are well on the way to learning to read. There are many pathways to becoming a reader. Experience with picture books is one way of learning to read. Other pathways to reading include looking at print on street signs and food packaging, playing computer games, watching videos and DVDs and listening to stories, rhymes and jokes.

Books, magazines, street signs, DVDs and food packaging are all examples of texts. Texts may be stories that are for enjoyment such as a novel, movie or CD-ROM 'talking book'. Other texts provide information, such as newspapers, catalogues and internet sites. Texts may be wholly print, a combination of print and pictures, or wholly visual (consisting of pictures and/or symbols). With increasing technology many texts, such as those on computers, combine pictures, print and sound.

Children come across a range of texts in their every day life with their families. Some examples are:

- newspapers and magazines;
- books;
- shopping catalogues;
- menus;
- television guides;
- bus timetables;
- street signs;
- maps;
- symbols and words on clothing;
- shopping lists;
- billboard advertisements;
- emails;
- SMS messages;
- letters and greeting cards;
- religious texts;
- homework books; and
- school newsletters.

Not all of these texts will be used by each family. Families interact with the types of printed material and electronic media that are relevant to their lives. As children take part in daily life they see family and community members using paper and electronic texts to find out information, to communicate with others and for pleasure.

Learning to read

What is reading?

Reading is about making meaning. As we read we draw on what we know about the world to make sense of the words and pictures that we see. From a very young age children are able to make sense of the print, pictures and symbols that they experience with their families and friends.

They may be able to read signs and symbols such as the 'Stop' sign, the wheelchair parking symbol and the McDonald's logo. They may be able to explain where friends and family live by looking at the train map, or be able to use the remote control to manipulate the video.

In these situations children learn that reading is relevant to their lives and can be used for a number of different purposes. And, when encouraged to read from the beginning, children also develop positive attitudes toward reading for the future.

In the past, being literate meant reading books and understanding what they meant as if there was only one meaning. Children were lead to believe that there was one 'correct' interpretation of a text. Today there is greater recognition that readers bring their own life experience to reading and that there are many different opinions as to what an author means.

In recent times children have been encouraged to be critical about what they read and view. This means understanding that authors and illustrators have a particular point of view and that we do not have to agree with this. In an increasingly technological age when the sources of information are not always clear, and when we are bombarded with advertisements, being able to read critically is essential. This is called critical literacy.

Critical literacy means looking beneath the surface words and pictures to the underlying viewpoint and purpose of the text. This means asking questions such as:

- What is the author's view?
- What other points of view are there?
- Do I agree with the author's view?

While this booklet focuses on reading, in reality reading, writing, speaking, listening and critical thinking about what we read are all important. They work together to make sense of the messages we receive. For instance, when you are involved in an Internet search, you are reading, viewing, listening and thinking critically as you look for information that is relevant. You may also be talking and listening or writing and creating images as you share this information with others.

This book provides you with information about how children learn to read. It will help you to recognise the many ways that young children understand reading and provide ideas for supporting children's reading.

The following sections provide a guide to the sorts of reading that children may be doing at different stages. It is important, however, to note that each child is different and learns at a different pace. We also need to remember that family experiences are different. The sorts of things young children know about reading will vary depending on the experiences they have at home and in their communities.

Yellow Duckings

Learning to read: Babies

What infants are learning about reading

Reading is not something that children learn to do at school. Reading begins at birth. Reading and writing develop alongside speaking and listening, as spoken language helps children begin to understand written language.

Babies are social beings. They want to take part in the life of their families and communities. And, through taking part in social interactions, babies begin to learn language.

When babies join in a game of peek-a-boo, or respond to your talking with babbling, they are learning how to take part in a conversation and how to exchange meanings with others. This is all part of learning to read.

As they listen to conversations, stories, rhymes and songs, babies learn about the sounds and patterns of the language/s that are used in their family and community. They are also learning that spoken and written language are used to express ideas and feelings. At the same time they are learning to gain pleasure from language.

Infants observe and try to make sense of the world around them. As they do this they are learning to understand the signs and symbols that are part of their social world. When adults name items in the environment, babies learn the words that are relevant to their culture.

Babies will often point to and vocalise about familiar objects or ask the name of objects. As they learn the appropriate terms, babies will begin to label the things around them. It is quite usual for children at this stage to use one word to cover many things. They might call every bird a duck, for example. Babies also begin to be able to relate objects from the real world to those that they see in books or on television. A child who is interested in Thomas the Tank Engine might call all trains Thomas.

Babies will look intently at objects, people or pictures of interest, often for long periods of time. They learn to recognise people and objects and may laugh or smile at a familiar picture or video character. There may be a particular book, video or television program that is a favourite. Babies may read their favourite book in their own way using 'book babble' or they may imitate the words and actions that they have seen many times on a television program.

Supporting babies' early language and reading

What you can do at home

- Have conversations with your baby. When you expect and wait for the baby to join in—even if it is a smile or a gurgle—then the baby is learning to take turns in a conversation.
- Play interactive games such as peek-a-boo. Babies enjoy repetitive games and actions and as they take part in these two-way exchanges they are learning to take turns and to initiate and respond to interactions.

What you can do when you are out and about

- Talk about objects that you see when you are out walking or at the park. Babies are interested in looking at objects and learning how to name the things they see.
- Sing songs and recite rhymes as you are driving in the car or walking along. These can be songs and rhymes that you learnt as a child, ones that the baby enjoys hearing on television, video or audiocassette or ones that you make up. The rhythm and repetition of many songs and rhymes make it easy for the child to join in the singing.
- Let your baby see and hear you reading. Read out loud as you check the use-by date on the baby food at the supermarket, or read the map and the street signs when you are trying to find a new place.
- Provide books for your baby to look at in the car, in the stroller and in the supermarket trolley.

- Tell stories. These may be familiar stories from your childhood, stories that you make up or retellings of a book or movie. Although babies will not understand everything that you say, they will be taking in the patterns and sounds of the language and will begin to understand how a story is structured.
- Read books that relate to your baby's experiences. If babies enjoy a particular television program or video they will often identify with the characters from these programs in books. If babies are used to going to the park or to the local shopping centre they will also enjoy books about these everyday experiences.

Sing songs and recite poems and rhymes as you play with the baby, and as you are settling the baby.

- Look at pictures and photographs. Illustrations or photographs of familiar objects, people and events are most likely to appeal to babies and engage them in conversations. Make your own book using photographs of the baby's family and events in the baby's life. This is often the child's favourite book!
- Provide books for your baby to look at and explore. Small cardboard books that can be stood up and that are easy for the baby to handle are most appropriate. These can be placed on the floor or high chair tray for the baby to look at. A book area can be created by standing some books up in an area of the room and by placing other books nearby.
- Watch television and videotapes with your baby. It is important to talk with the baby about what is happening and encourage them to join in songs and actions.
- Talk to your baby. Explain what you are doing when you change a nappy or when you are bathing the baby.
- Sing songs and recite poems and rhymes as you play with your baby, and as you are settling the baby.

Learning to read: Toddlers

What toddlers are learning about reading

Toddlers are active learners who are rapidly increasing their understanding of the world around them. They are learning new words all the time and they are able to talk about objects, people, events and feelings. Stories often appeal to children of this age. Children are able to relate to the characters and events in the story and think about ideas, relationships and feelings.

At this stage children are generally beginning to understand how stories work. When they see a favourite video many times or hear a book read over and over again, young children are often able to retell the story or act it out in their play. As they do this they change characters and plots and make them into what they want them to be. This helps children to understand language and story.

Toddlers may join in the reading of a familiar book, or join in speaking and singing along as a well-known video is playing. The child may be able to fill in the words when the adult pauses, may read along with the adult, or be an echo and read words after the adult has read them first. This is more likely to happen when the text (book, video or song) is well-known and predictable. Predictable texts are ones that rhyme, for example *Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's dairy* and ones with a repetitive refrain such as 'and along came Hairy Maclary'.

As they are active explorers of their worlds, toddlers are often interested in how things work and appreciate texts that give information. Factual books, posters, videos and computer games that are linked to a child's interest help the child to learn new words and ideas. When a text relates to a child's interest they will often listen to complex language and study detailed illustrations and diagrams. A toddler of two who is interested in Thomas the Tank Engine, for example, may enjoy books that explain how steam engines work.

Toddlers often understand that print has meaning. They notice symbols and signs in their environment. They may ask 'What does that say?'. Some children will recognise the first letter of their name in different words and say 'That's my name'. Many children will recognise symbols and logos that they encounter when they are out in the community—the wheelchair symbol, for example. Often young children are able to read words related to their favourite television or video characters.

Children at this stage are developing ideas about how print works and what is involved in reading. They will often try out their ideas in play, by reading a book to a doll, for example, or by reading the instructions on a food package as they pretend to cook dinner, or by scribbling something on a piece of paper and asking you to read it.

Children learn from their everyday experiences with their families. Some children will know how to handle books from a young age. They will know how to hold a book and how to turn the pages. They will perhaps understand the difference between the print and the illustrations and know that print in English goes from top to bottom and from left to right. They may recognise some familiar words.

What you can do when you are out and about

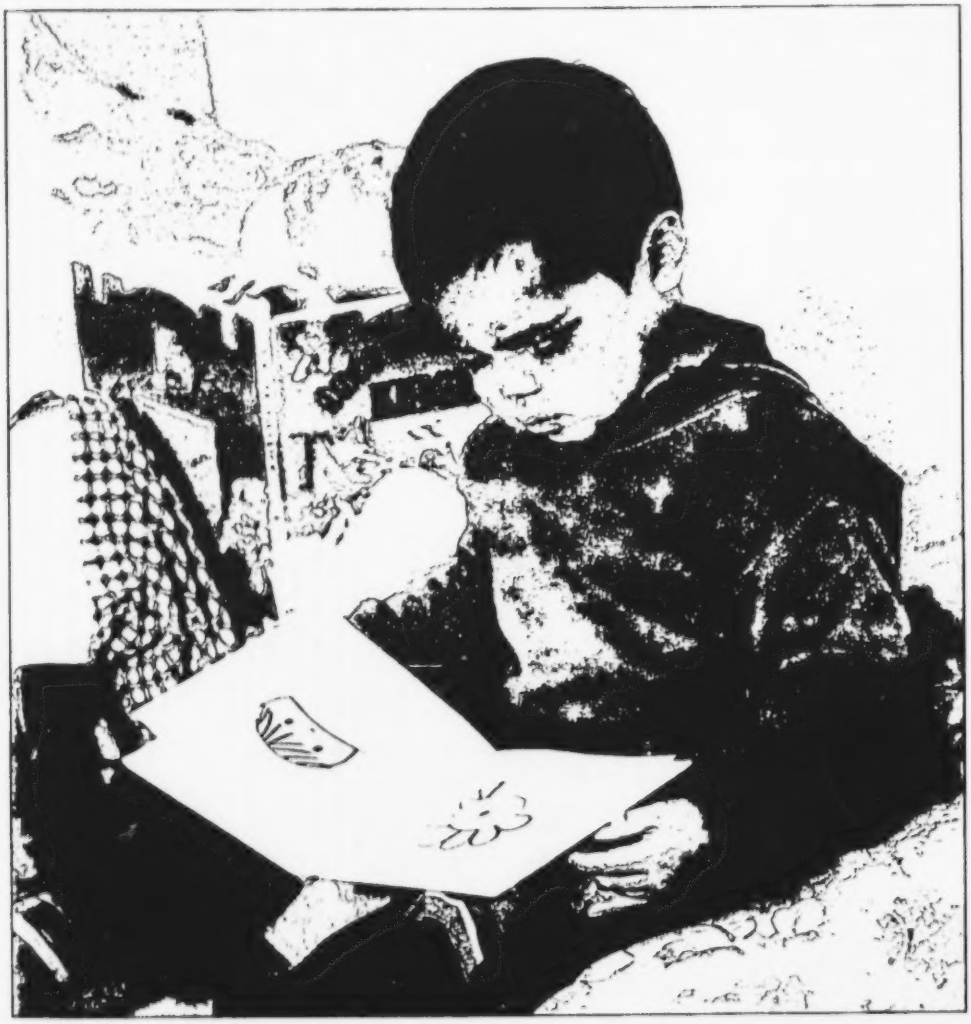
- Involve your child in using print in everyday situations—for example ticking off things on the shopping list at the supermarket, reading the sign at the station to check where the next train is going, and reading the score at the football.
- Point out and talk about print in the environment. This may be the signs in the shopping centre, symbols and words on buses, print on food packing or the menu in the cafe. Point out and discuss print in different languages on shop signs, newspapers, menus and so on.
- Recite rhymes and poems and sing songs as you are driving in the car or walking. Play clapping games such as asking the child to clap the syllables in theirs and others' names. These experiences will help your child to hear the sounds of language which is important when they later need to break words down into sounds.
- Talk with children. A wide vocabulary and understandings of the way that sentences are put together are important as they help children make sense of what they read.
- Play songs and story tapes as you are driving in the car. If the same favourites are played over and over again the child will be able to join in.

Other children will be good at using the television and the video or DVD player, they will be able to use the remote control and will be able to recognise familiar characters, songs and dialogue.
Some children will be able to use computers from a young age. They will be able to manipulate the mouse, use a key board, read the symbols on the computer and navigate their way around the screen.

Supporting toddlers' reading

What you can do at home

- Let your child see and hear you reading. This could be reading football magazines, checking the library catalogue on the internet, or reading advertising flyers for the supermarket specials. It is important that both males and females do this so that children see both genders as readers.
- Provide your child with access to a range of texts that they can look at and read on their own and with others. These can include books, magazines, television, video, computer games, advertising flyers, menus and so on.
- Use your native language if you are bilingual or consider ways of exposing your child to languages other than English. This can be through bilingual books, story tapes, songs, newspapers, magazines, videos, or brochures.
- Involve your child in reading and writing everyday texts such as shopping lists, emails, birthday invitations and greeting cards.
- Encourage your child to read with you as you follow the instructions to put a toy together or the recipe to make a cake.
- Join in with your child as they watch television or a video, talk about what is happening, sing the songs, join in the actions and read the print.
- Read books and magazines, the writing on the cereal box, print on clothing—anything your child is interested in reading.
- Talk with your child about what they are reading and viewing and encourage critical thinking. This may mean asking whether the grandmother in the story was like their grandmother, or if they think all step-mothers are cruel.
- Compare the book and video versions of the same story. This helps children to see that there are different interpretations of the same text.



Learning to read: Preschool and early school

Preschoolers and early schoolers are developing their understanding of reading. Some children will be capable readers before they start school while others will not be reading confidently until the first grade. Children at this stage need lots of support and positive encouragement in their early attempts at reading.

During the preschool years children generally understand that print has meaning and are able to recognise familiar words. This is often their name and other words that have meaning for them, such as print that they see in their daily environment.

For many children the first words that they read will be connected to their popular culture interests. When Pokémon was a craze many three- and four-year-olds were able to read the names of the different 'pocket monsters' as this was something that they knew about.

Preschoolers will often first show reading behaviours in play. In play children feel safe and secure and are willing to take risks. They will often have a go at reading and writing as it is part of pretending to be a bus driver or doctor. The emphasis is on the play rather than on whether the children are 'really' writing a prescription or reading the bus ticket.

In these early stages of 'pretend' or 'role-play' reading children are generally confident in their abilities. They may use a combination of pictures, memory, recognition of a few familiar words and knowledge of story language to sound and look like a reader. They may use a reader's voice and run their fingers across the page under the print as they read.

As children learn more about reading and what is involved in the process of reading they tend to become less confident. Whereas earlier they would pick up a book and 'read' it by making up words that made sense and related to the pictures, now they will tell you that they 'can't read'. This is because they now have a better understanding of what reading actually involves. For many children this happens in their first year of school.

When children begin to read in a conventional sense their reading becomes much slower as they are focusing on letters and words rather than whole sentences. Reading becomes quite stilted as children focus more closely on the print. This is not something to worry about. It shows that children are figuring out the complex task of reading.

When we are reading we use a number of different things to help us make sense of what we read. These include:

- experience of the world, including our understanding of words and ideas;
- knowledge of the sounds of language, including rhyme (the same sounds at the end of a word) and alliteration (the same sound at the beginning of a word), and breaking words into sounds;

- understandings of the structures of language, including how words are put together to make sentences; and
- understandings of print, including knowing that print goes from left to right in English, recognising letters, understanding punctuation such as full stops and exclamation marks, as well as knowing about upper and lower case letters.

Effective readers use all of these things. It is important to talk to children about the processes involved in reading and to encourage them to use as many cues as they can to help them to make meaning from print. This means prompting children to use the following ideas when they are reading:

- Thinking about the meaning of the text—Does it make sense? Can the illustrations help? What do I know about the topic of this book?
- Looking for any familiar words—Are there any words that I have seen before that I know how to read?
- Using knowledge of letters and sounds—Can I sound this word out?
- Using the predictability of the text—Is there a phrase that is repeated? Is there any rhyme or alliteration that can help me to figure this word out?
- Thinking about the structure of sentences—What sort of word needs to come next (an action word? a person's name?)

What you can do to support preschoolers and early schoolers

Encouraging a positive attitude towards reading

- Read books with your child, watch videos together, sings songs, recite poems. Long after children have begun to read on their own they still need to be read to.
- Find books, magazines, computer software, internet sites and videos that connect to your child's interests, whether it be life in a dam, diggers and dump trucks, or Fireman Sam. It is important that children see the purposes for reading and find reading to be meaningful and relevant to their lives.
- Ensure that books provided for your child to read are interesting and make sense. Books with a small number of words that only use a few sounds may appear to be easier to read but if they don't make sense your child will not want to read them and will soon learn to expect that reading doesn't make sense.
- Place books, magazines and writing materials in a range of areas so that print materials are easy to access throughout the day. Place them outside—in the cubby house, on the verandah, hanging in a basket from a tree—so that reading is not seen as only for quiet, inside time. You can include information books and magazines about plants, birds, and insects that may relate to the outdoor environment. Place texts about transport next to the train track or the box of cars.

Supporting critical literacy

- Ask questions and encourage your child to ask questions that promote critical thinking about texts. This may be looking at the way that 'junk foods' are advertised on children's television, the way that toys always look more exciting in advertisements than in real life, or the fact that there are no families that look like yours on television or in children's books.
- Read, tell and view different versions of the same story. This works well with books such as the Three Little Pigs where there are a number of different versions of the traditional tale as well as alternate versions where the wolf's point of view is presented.
- Ask your child to think about alternative endings for stories, or to think of additional characters and what they would do in the story.
- Look at 'junk mail' with your child. Talk about whether all girls like to wear pink or look like Barbie, or whether all boys like trucks and Action Man.
- Read books and watch videos that challenge traditional views and that include people who are not generally included. For example read books about working class families and people who go on holiday in caravan parks (many of Bob Graham's books such as The Spirit of Hope and Sandy Beach are useful for this purpose).
- Talk with children about collector's items such as spinning tops and cards. Discuss why these are placed in food such as potato chips and how these products are marketed to children.

- Talk about what happens to the characters in the books, videos and 'talking books' that you share with your child, so that you help them make connections between their own lives and the lives of others.
- Make sure that your child sees both males and females reading. It is particularly important that boys see males reading.

Helping your child to understand the processes of reading

- Point out features of print to your child as you are reading and writing. For example talk about the use of upper and lower case letters, full-stops and exclamation marks.
- Talk about letters. Look for letters in words. Draw your child's attention to sounds and rhyme when reading and when sharing rhymes and poems. Play around with rhyming words.
- Talk with your child about what they are drawing or painting on paper and on computer. If they have a story to tell, write down what they say. Encourage more competent writers to create their own texts on the computer or on paper. Children can generally read these texts confidentally as they are written in their own words.
- Read whatever texts your child is interested in over and over again—these are the ones that they will read first when they begin to read!
- Encourage your child to take part in pretend play. Whether they are pretending to be a vet, or a pirate or someone from their favourite television show, pretend play provides many experiences that assist with reading. Add materials such as pens and paper, magazines, telephone directories and train timetables to the pretend play. When these sorts of resources are available, children will naturally include reading and writing in their play.
- Encourage children who are sounding out words when reading to use a range of other strategies as well. These should include using the picture cues, focusing on the meaning (so thinking about what word would make sense here) and listening for rhyming patterns.

Learning to read is an exciting time and can be as rewarding for parents and carers as it is for children.

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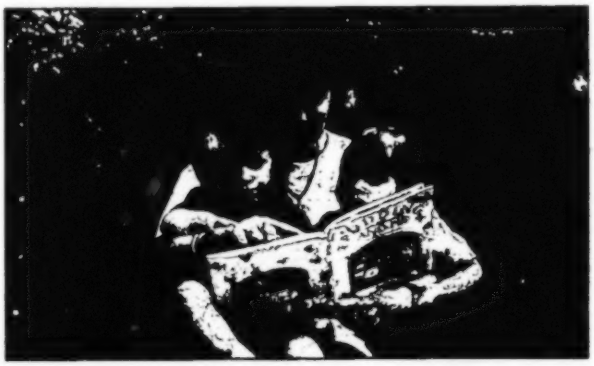

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